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Viet shells, tanks drive guerrillas from Ampil camp

Pichai Nippittavit, a correspondent for the Associated Press who wrote this dispatch, was one of only three reporters known to have entered the battlefield of Ampil. The other two were from Thai newspapers.

AMPIL, Cambodia (AP) — Vietnamese forces laid down a huge, pre-dawn artillery barrage on Ampil guerrilla headquarters yesterday, then broke through three outer defense rings in a tank-led push to the heart of the camp, witnesses and Thai officers said.

About three-quarters of the camp was in Vietnamese hands late yesterday, Lt. Gen. Pichitr Kullavanijaya, commander of Thailand's 1st Army Region reported in Bangkok.

At least 20 guerrillas were killed and parts of the base were destroyed, said intelligence sources in the Thai Army's Eastern Task Force.

A reporter who slipped into Ampil at 10 a.m. saw panicky guerrillas flee when armor broke through Ampil's defenses and plunged into the center of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front headquarters.

(In Washington, the Cambodian-American community protested yesterday at Lafayette Park against the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea, also known as Cambodia, and their attacks on resistance and refugee camps.

(A letter sent to President Reagan requested him to consider emergency refugee relief programs for the victims of fighting on the Kampuchean border. It also asked him to use diplomatic pressure to ask Vietnam to respect the U.N. resolution calling for its withdrawal from Kampuchea so that free and democratic elections could take place.)

Gen. Pichitr said the Vietnamese did not gain much militarily because they failed to wipe out the guerrilla defenders, who split into small groups and slipped away. He said sporadic fighting continued.

Frontline accounts put the number of Vietnamese attackers at 1,000, against about 5,000 guerrillas of the non-communist KPNLF.

But the biggest weapon in the guerrillas' arsenal are 82mm recoilless rifles, Chinese copies of a 1950s vintage Soviet design. The defenders also relied on mortars, heavy machine guns and B-40 rocket-propelled grenades. Individual guerrillas were armed mostly with AK-47 assault rifles.

Maj. Gen. Salya Sriphen, Thai Eastern Force commander, told reporters in the village of Ban Sangae, Thailand, right across the border from the battlefield, that the Ampil defenders destroyed three of the Soviet-supplied T-54 tanks and two M-113 armored personnel carriers.

The big Vietnamese guns fell silent for 10 minutes every hour as the artillerymen adjusted the range. Then they would start up again.

The guerrillas had anticipated an attack yesterday — the sixth anniversary of the Vietnamese capture of Phnom Penh, the capital of Kampuchea.

The Vietnamese, who are allied with the Soviets, invaded Kampuchea in late 1978 and drove the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge regime from Phnom Penh on Jan. 7, 1979.

Ampil's 23,500 civilians evacuated the camp more than a week ago to a U.N.-prepared evacuation site 2.5 miles inside Thailand.

Thai officers said more tanks — as many as 20 by some accounts — were in action yesterday than on any other single day in six years of fighting on the border.

The KPNLF is among three guerrilla organizations battling the Vietnamese-installed regime of Heng Samrin in Kampuchea. The other two are the communist Khmer Rouge and a group loyal to Prince Norodom Sihanouk former head of state in Cambodia.

The Khmer Rouge fields more than 30,000 fighters, the KPNLF about 12,000 and the Sihanouk loyalists about 5,000. Western estimates say the Vietnamese have about 160,000 troops in Cambodia.

As the Vietnamese armor rumbled into Ampil, clouds of smoke rose from the camp. One armored vehicle clanked up the camp's main road about 1,600 feet from the command bunker.

Some defenders rushed from Ampil and sought shelter near an anti-tank ditch on the Thai side of the border. Several ran from the tanks faster than three fleeing reporters.

Thai troops dug in across the frontier as stray shells from the fighting fell in Thai territory. Gen. Salya reported that shell fragments wounded four Thai soldiers. He said more than 4,400 Thai civilians were evacuated from the area to safety.

Ampil, 175 miles east of Bangkok, had been the last major camp of the KPNLF still intact in Hanoi's latest dry-season offensive, which began in mid-November.

A Thai official speaking by telephone from Ubon Ratchathani province said Vietnamese forces had overrun KPNLF bases at Nong Chan, Obok, Rithisen and Sok Sonh and a Khmer Rouge camp at Nam Yun.